Reporter's notebook

After 50 years, literary manifesto holds

By DAVID TURNER
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The first news I had of the 50th anniversary symposium on the Fugitive-Agrarian movement to take place at Vanderbilt University gave me a spell of vertigo.

I imagined, as I hastily made plans to attend, that the poet John Keats must have had the same feeling when he penned "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer": "Oft of one wide expanse had I been told/That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;/Yet did I never breathe its pure serene/Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold." My Homer was 20th-century southern literature, and my Chapman was the band of twelve Fugitive-Agrarian writers who had given it such a surge.

Their manifesto of 1930, "I'll Take My Stand," had attracted defenders of the humanities, articulating their fears about the sacrifice of familial and religious values to the dynamo of Progress. The twelve defended the ideas, among many others, that there were universals applicable to everyone, and that mankind would not be satisfied by a life devoted to assembly-line tasks.

THE FUGITIVE-AGRARIANS — most notably Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom — had loomed like buddhas over my college years. Their 1930 volume and subsequent books had affected every one of my English professors, and in turn us, their literary progeny. Now I was about to witness the three surviving contributors: Robert Penn Warren, Lytle Lanier and Andrew Lytle.

So the Union Hall auditorium was, predictably, filled to the rafters Saturday morning, Nov. 1. A cordoned-off section down front held the other "big guns" of the Agrarian movement today: Melvin Bradford, English professor at the university of Dallas and author of "A Better Guide Than Reason"; George Core, editor of the Sewanee Review; and Walter Sullivan, professor of English at Vanderbilt and an instigator of the seminar.

A reverential hush came over the audience, as the words began to come, first from the presiding speaker, Professor Rob Roy Purdy, then from Cleanth Brooks, the emeritus professor of rhetoric at Yale University who with Penn Warren created the "New Criticism" and a generation of English professors who taught by their precepts.

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As the TV cameras hummed and the elaborate tape decks recorded each man's every word, I thought the trio must have noted the proceedings with irony. These men, who had so eloquently shaken their fists at the growing industrializationof society and the depersonalization of people, were momentarily held captive by the same technology 50 years later.

IF THE THREE writers, all pushing 80 years, proved nothing else by their reunion, they demonstrated that there is no strong link between the spirit and the body. They were old —and looked it— but their humor, quickness and grasp of the proceedings were as undiminished as when they first sat down with nine other men to write "I'll Take My Stand."

Brooks, no young blade himself, controlled the ebb and flow of the responses with equal humor and perspicacity. Picking up Brooks' football metaphor, the three Agrarians "interalled," "pitched out" and "snapped" their responses during the three-hour-long session.

As always, there were the words. During the morning session, they fell like gems from each writer and stuck in the listener's mind. For the newspapermen present, they made great copy.

The three made one aware of the value of self-criticism, and how difficult it can be to engage in the practice. Penn Warren, speaking in a raspy voice that could lapse into mimicry when tempted, admitted the group was "weak on suggestions, but dead center on the negative" effects on industrialism.

Lanier, a scientist by training, spoke . . . like a scientist. He washed, dried and put each word on a glass slide before speaking it, and came across more clearly than his associates. Saying "I'll Take My Stand" was "pretty highly generalized" in its attack, Lanier went so far as to call the symposium "a gross understatement of ills" of 20th century America.

LYTLE, KNOWN for his colorful past editorship of the Sewanee Review and a handful of good novels, showed that side of himself he must have left at the Yale School of Drama. He was mischievous, the class clown with a gift for poetry.

One had the feeling all morning that literary history — a separatist term the three would probably despise — was again being made, as it was in 1930. I finally despaired of doing justice to these Fugitive-Agrarians, whose own words have enriched literature so. Better, I thought, to let them speak for themselves that morning:

Penn Warren: "When we begin to look at man not as an individual, but as a mass, he becomes more susceptible to manipulation. He becomes the advertising man's prey, the public relation man's prey."

Lanier: "Our future rulers will be, not philosopher-kings, but technician-kings. Continued growth is a contradiction, we need other-than-economic growth. I think the work ethic has been overdone."

Lytle: "We have seen the family unit damaged almost unto death. The family is most important and agrarian life strengthens the family. A family has to have location."

PENN WARREN, who still divides his time between a teaching post at Yale University and his Vermont retreat, pointed to a survey of National Merit Scholarship finalists in trying to get at a definition of excellence. The scholars, he said, "always had someone behind them. It could have been an illiterate cook, a teacher or a parent." But it was always someone who gave the child "a long-range sense of himself. If you destroy the sense of person, you destroy the child."

In the tradition of the best scholars, the three wore their learning lightly. To a student of Agrarianism like myself, the three seemed unencumbered by the studio lights, the flashing camera bulbs and the cleaving attention of 350 spectators. Lanier was the exacting but good-natured professor as he autographed my copy of "I'll Take My Stand," demanding to know if I had actually read it.

I think everyone at the symposium — students, curiosity seekers and peers alike — felt purged as they left. For these Agrarian-Fugitives, time and experience have not diluted their adherence to things of value. At the 75th and 100th symposiums on Agrarianism, the stage will be given over to different actors, some of whom appeared as understudies at the 50th anniversary. But those on the stage tonight may have met some of the originals did not feel deceived.